With kind regards.
R.H.

BIOGRAPHY

The Medical History of Sir Walter Scott

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SCOTT, Sir Walter [1771-1832]

THE MEDICAL HISTORY OF SIR WALTER SCOTT*

A STUDY of the medical history of a great man is of interest not only for the light which it often throws upon his life and work, but also for what it tells us of the state of medical knowledge and practice at his time. The interest is greater when, as in the case of Sir Walter Scott, the subject is a master of graphic description and has left us vivid pictures of his symptoms in his own words. In this centenary year of Scott's death, therefore, when fresh accounts of his life and estimates of his position in literature are being put forth, it may be worth while to look at him for a moment from a medical point of view.

Scott was one of a family of twelve children, the first six of whom all died in infancy. This was no uncommon occurrence in those days of large families. One has only to read the inscriptions on the tombstones of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in any churchyard to find the same melancholy tale. Of the causes of the deaths of his little brothers and sisters we know nothing. Their father attributed them, rightly or wrongly, to the confined air of the College Wynd—little better than a slum—in which the family then lived in Edinburgh and, certainly, the children who were born after removal to George Square all survived. No doubt the infectious fevers, especially diphtheria and scarlatina, must have taken a heavy toll of infant life in those days and smallpox was still a scourge. There must also have been a large mortality from tuberculosis, for consumption was rife amongst all classes and children must frequently have been brought into contact with it. Scott was early exposed to this risk himself:

"I was an uncommonly healthy child," he writes, "but had nearly died in consequence of my first nurse being ill of a consumption, a

* Read before the Osler Club, London, May 1932.

circumstance which she chose to conceal, though to do so was murder to both herself and me. She went privately to consult Dr Black, the celebrated professor of chemistry, who put my father on his guard. The woman was dismissed, and I was consigned to a healthy peasant. . ."

This is interesting as showing that the risk *to the child*, of being nursed by a tuberculous woman was, even at that time, understood. The incident also raises a disputed question in medical ethics. If a doctor discovers a disease in an employee, which may be a danger to the employer or his children, is he justified in informing the employer of the fact? This is not the place to discuss the question, but apparently Dr Black had no doubt what was the proper course to take. It must be remembered, however, that the rights of servants were not so carefully safeguarded in those days as they are now and a modern doctor might have to act with more circumspection.

Thanks to the "healthy peasant" the little Scott seems to have been a flourishing infant, but when he was eighteen months old his first serious illness overtook him. This is how he describes it:—

"One night, I have been often told, I showed a great reluctance to be caught and put to bed, and after being chased about the room, was apprehended and consigned to my dormitory with some difficulty. It was the last time I was to show such personal agility. In the morning I was discovered to be affected with the fever which often accompanies the cutting of large teeth. It held me three days. On the fourth, when they went to bathe me as usual, they discovered that I had lost the power of my right leg. My grandfather, an excellent anatomist as well as physician, the late worthy Alexander Wood, and many others of the most respectable of the faculty, were consulted. There appeared to be no dislocation or sprain; blisters and other topical remedies were applied in vain. When the efforts of regular physicians had been exhausted, without the slightest success, my anxious parents, during the course of many years, eagerly grasped at every prospect of cure which was held out by the promise of empirics, or of ancient ladies or gentlemen who conceived themselves entitled to recommend various remedies, some of which were of a nature sufficiently singular. But the advice of my grandfather, Dr Rutherford, that I should be sent to reside in the country, to give the chance of natural exertion, excited by free air and liberty, was first resorted to, and before I have the recollection of the slightest event, I was, agreeably to this friendly counsel, an inmate in the farmhouse of Sandy-Knowe."

This, of course, was an attack of poliomyelitis, which left Scott lame for life. The Dr Rutherford whom he mentions was his maternal grandfather and Professor of Medicine at Edinburgh, so his parents had obtained the best advice, but it is not surprising that the nature of the malady was not understood seeing that the disease was not properly differentiated for another fifty years or more. Anyhow, the advice of Dr Rutherford to send the little patient to the country was, perhaps, the best that could have been given and the beneficial effects of it after a trial of more than two years are thus described by Scott:—

"My health was by this time a good deal confirmed by the country air, and the influence of that imperceptible and unfatiguing exercise to which the good sense of my grandfather had subjected me; for when the day was fine, I was usually carried out and laid down beside the old shepherd, among the crags or rocks around which he fed his sheep. The impatience of a child soon inclined me to struggle with my infirmity, and I began by degrees to stand, to walk, and to run. Although the limb affected was much shrunk and contracted, my general health, which was of more importance, was much strengthened by being frequently in the open air, and, in a word, I who in a city had probably been condemned to hopeless and helpless decrepitude, was now a healthy, high-spirited, and, my lameness apart, a sturdy child."

Meanwhile some curious methods of treatment were tried :—

"Among the odd remedies," he says, "recurred to to aid my lameness, someone had recommended that so often as a sheep was killed for the use of the family, I should be stripped, and swathed up in the skin, warm as it was flayed from the carcass of the animal. In this Tartar-like habiliment, I well remember lying upon the floor of the little parlour in the farmhouse, while my grandfather, a venerable old man with white hair, used every excitement to make me try to crawl."

Superstitions die hard and perhaps this method of treatment has not, even yet, quite disappeared. I remember, at all events, being consulted about twenty years ago in the case of a child with poliomyelitis to whose limb the skin of a newly-flayed sheep had been applied, and yet the father was managing director of one of our leading drug companies!

At the age of four the little Scott was taken to Bath for a year in the belief that the waters might be of some advantage to his lameness, but although he went through "all the usual discipline of the pump-room and baths," there was, as might

have been expected, no advantage obtained. Later on, when he was eight years old, a course of sea-bathing at Prestonpans was tried with a like disappointing result. His advisers however, did not despair and, when he was fourteen or fifteen, we read of electricity, which was then coming into vogue, being applied with great vigour. As the regular Faculty had failed, recourse was had to the notorious "Doctor" James Graham, who has been described as an Emperor of Quacks. Scott speaks of him thus:—

"The celebrated Dr Graham was an empiric of some genius and great assurance. In fact, he had a dash of madness in his composition. He had a fine electrical apparatus, and used it with skill. I myself, amongst others, was subjected to a course of electricity under his charge. After this, growing quite wild, he set up his Temple of Health and lectured on the *celestial bed.* He attempted a course of these lectures at Edinburgh, and, as the magistrates refused to let him do so, he libelled them in a series of advertisements. In one tirade, he declared that he 'looked down upon them as the sun in his meridian glory looks down on the poor, feeble, stinking glimmer of an expiring farthing candle or as God Himself in the plenitude of his omnipotence may regard the insolent bouncings of a few refractory maggots in a rotten cheese.'

"Graham was a good looking man; he used to come to the Greyfriars Church in a suit of white and silver, with a chapeau-bras; and his hair marvellously dressed into a sort of double toupée, which divided upon his head like the two tops of Parnassus. Lady Hamilton is said to have first enacted his Goddess of Health, being at this time a fille-de-joie of great celebrity. The Temple of Health dwindled into a sort of obscene *hell* or gambling house. In a quarrel which took place there, a poor young man was run into the bowels with a red-hot poker of which injury he died. The mob vented their fury on the house. The magistrates, somewhat of the latest, shut up the exhibition . . . Graham's next receipt was the earth-bath with which he brought some cures, but that also failing, he was, I believe, literally starved to death."

In a letter, written many years later, he says that even at the time he had a shrewd idea that Graham's magnetism was all humbug.

Scott triumphed over his paralysis, just as he did in later life over his attacks of gall-stones, by sheer grit and determination. In spite of his lameness he could walk thirty miles in a day and ride a hundred in twenty-four hours, and when he

refers to it in his *Journal* and elsewhere, it is always jestingly. How different was the peevish sensitiveness of his contemporary Byron to a kindred deformity.

From the time of his attack of poliomyelitis until he was eight years old, the boy lived alone with his grandparents and a devoted spinster aunt. There can be little doubt that he developed, as was almost inevitable in the circumstances, some of the symptoms of "only-childism" as the following passage of his autobiographical sketch shows :—

"I felt the change from being a single indulged brat, to becoming a member of a large family very severely; for under the gentle government of my kind grandmother, who was meekness itself, and of my aunt, who, though of a higher temper, was exceedingly attached to me, I had acquired a degree of license which could not be permitted in a large family. I had sense enough, however, to bend my temper to my new circumstances; but such was the agony which I internally experienced, that I have guarded against nothing more in the education of my own family, than against their acquiring habits of self-willed caprice and domination."

"Only-childism" was a rare condition in those days and no doubt it met with little sympathy.

From the time of his return, at the age of eight, to his father's house in Edinburgh, we hear nothing of his health for some years except that, when he was twelve, he was again sent to Sandy-Knowe for some months on account of his having "out-grown his strength." At the age of fourteen, however, a second serious illness befell him. Here is his own description of it :—

". . . About the second year of my apprenticeship, my health, which, from rapid growth and other causes, had been hitherto rather uncertain and delicate, was affected by the breaking of a blood-vessel. The regimen I had to undergo on this occasion was far from agreeable. It was Spring, and the weather raw and cold, yet I was confined to bed with a single blanket, and bled and blistered till I scarcely had a pulse left. I had all the appetite of a growing boy, but was prohibited any sustenance beyond what was absolutely necessary for the support of nature, and that in vegetables alone. Above all, with a considerable disposition to talk, I was not permitted to open my lips without one or two old ladies who watched my couch being ready at once to souse upon me, 'imposing silence with a stilly sound.'"

On reading this account one's natural impression would be that young Scott had had an attack of hæmoptysis and one

would also be surprised that something very like open-air treatment had been adopted in dealing with it. Lockhart, however, states quite clearly that the hæmorrhage was due to the bursting of a blood vessel "in the lower bowels" and that Dr Rutherford considered the lad's recovery from it as little less than miraculous. He goes on :—

"His sweet temper and calm courage were, no doubt, important elements of safety. He submitted without a murmur to the severe discipline prescribed by his affectionate physician, and found consolation in poetry, romance, and the enthusiasm of young friendship. Day after day John Irving relieved his mother and sister in their attendance upon him. The bed on which he lay was piled with a constant succession of works of imagination, and sad realities were forgotten amidst the brilliant day-dreams of genius drinking unwearied from the eternal fountains of Spenser and Shakespeare. Chess was recommended as a relief to these unintermitted though desultory studies; and he engaged eagerly in the game which had found favour with so many of his Paladins. Mr Irving remembers playing it with him hour after hour, in very cold weather when, the windows being kept open as a part of the medical treatment, nothing but youthful nerves and spirit could have persevered."

The Dr Rutherford who was in charge of him during this illness was Dr Daniel Rutherford, Professor of Botany at Edinburgh, Scott's uncle and a son of the Dr John Rutherford who had attended him in his attack of infantile paralysis. Scott had a high opinion of his uncle and speaks of him as

"a very ingenious as well as an excellent man, more of a gentleman than his profession too often are, for he could not take the backstairs mode of rising in it, otherwise he might have been much more wealthy."

It was characteristic of the medicine of the time that, in this, as in all Scott's illnesses, the treatment seems to have been almost worse than the disease. He refers to this rather plaintively himself:—

"After one or two relapses," he says, "my constitution recovered the injury it had sustained, though for several months afterwards I was restricted to a severe vegetable diet. And I must say, in passing, that, though I gained health under this necessary restriction, yet it was far from being agreeable to me, and I was affected whilst under its influence with a nervousness which I never felt before or since. A disposition to start upon slight alarms—a want of decision in feeling

and acting, which has not usually been my failing—an acute sensibility to trifling inconveniences — and an unnecessary apprehension of contingent misfortunes, rise to my memory as connected with my vegetable diet, although they may very possibly have been entirely the result of the disorder and not of the cure."

In reading the lives of historical personages one is often exasperated at being unable to fit in the symptoms of their illnesses, as described in the records, with those of any disease known to us to-day. The last illness of Charles the Second is, of course, the classical example, but this mysterious malady of Scott's is almost as difficult to identify. *What* could cause repeated and dangerous hæmorrhage "from the lower bowel" in a healthy lad of fifteen? He was too old for polypus, too young for hæmorrhoids, ulcerative colitis is almost unknown at that age, and the whole history does not suggest typhoid fever. I am afraid it must remain a mystery, but the illness, whatever its nature, was in one respect a blessing in disguise. Just as Scott's attack of infantile paralysis led to his passing his earlier years in the country instead of in Edinburgh, and so laid the foundations of his affection for the Border Country and its traditions which was to be a dominating passion throughout his life, so this long illness, occurring at the impressionable period of adolescence and affording abundant opportunity for the reading of romantic literature as his sole means of passing the time, no doubt gave his mind a bias towards that kind of literary composition in which he was afterwards so greatly to excel. We cannot even regret the lameness which resulted from his infantile paralysis. Had it not been for this disability it is highly probable that he would have become a soldier, a life for which he had much natural inclination and aptitude. Had he done so, he would have been kept busy in the Napoleonic wars and, although he might have distinguished himself at the battle of Waterloo, the world would probably never have been enriched by the Waverley novels.

After his recovery from this illness, Scott seems to have settled into robust health, but from a casual reference in a letter of one of his correspondents, he appears to have had at least one attack of gout, a malady which few men, and especially literary men, of his period escaped. He was at that time only thirty-six years of age.

It was ten years later, in the winter of 1816-17, that he first began to suffer from the third serious illness of his life—

attacks of gall-stone colic. He states somewhere that this disease was hereditary in his family and his daughter Sophia (Mrs Lockhart) certainly suffered from it, but on another occasion, writing to his son, he says:—

"The habit of drinking wine so much practised when I was a young man, occasioned, I am convinced, many of my cruel stomach complaints."

In this he probably did himself an injustice for, although Scott could certainly be a boon companion at times, he was, in the middle and later years of his life, a very moderate drinker as men went in his day. It is true that James Ballantyne once had the temerity to suggest, perhaps jocularly, that it might be a good thing if he, Scott, were to join a Temperance Society; but for this piece of officiousness he had to make a prompt apology. It is more likely in every way that his gall-stones were due to over-eating rather than to over-drinking. Although he took only two meals a day, Scott was always a good trencher-man. His breakfasts especially were Gargantuan. As Lockhart tells us:—

"Breakfast was his chief meal. . . . His table was always provided, in addition to the usually plentiful delicacies of a Scotch breakfast, with some solid article on which he did most lusty execution—a round of beef—a pasty, such as made Gil Blas' eyes water, and, most welcome of all, a cold sheep's head, the charms of which primitive dainty he has so gallantly defended against the disparaging sneers of Dr Johnson and his bear-leader. A huge brown loaf flanked his elbow and it was placed upon a broad wooden trencher that he might cut and come again with the bolder knife.

"Port he considered as physic: he never willingly swallowed more than a glass of it. He liked no wines except champagne and claret, but as to the last he was no connoisseur and sincerely preferred a tumbler of whisky toddy. He rarely took any other potation when quite alone with his family; but at the Sunday board he circulated the champagne briskly during dinner and considered a pint of claret each man's fair share afterwards."

In addition it must be remembered that, throughout the winter months, whilst the Court was sitting, he got very little exercise and dined out a great deal, whilst from the character of his physique he was a man who needed regular exercise in the open air. Anyhow, whatever the cause, Scott suffered at short intervals from the most violent attacks of biliary colic for a

space of more than two years and they very nearly cost him his life; nor did he ever entirely recover from their effects. In March 1817, he writes to his friend Morritt:—

"I had been plagued all through this winter with cramps in my stomach, which I endured as a man of mould might, and endeavoured to combat them by drinking scalding water, and so forth. As they grew rather unpleasantly frequent, I had reluctant recourse to Baillie. But before his answer arrived, on the 5th, I had a most violent attack, which broke up a small party at my house, and sent me to bed roaring like a bull-calf. All sorts of remedies were applied, as in the case of Gil Blas' pretended colic, but such was the pain of the real disorder that it outdeviled the Doctor hollow. Even heated salt, which was applied in such a state that it burned my shirt to rags, I hardly felt when clapped to my stomach. At length the symptoms became inflammatory, and dangerously so, the seat being the diaphragm. They only gave way to very profuse bleeding and blistering, which, under higher assistance, saved my life. My recovery was slow and tedious from the state of exhaustion. I could neither stir for weakness and giddiness, nor read for dazzling in my eyes, nor listen for a whizzing sound in my ears, nor even think for lack of the power of arranging my ideas. So I had a comfortless time of it for about a week. . . . As for dinner and so forth, I care little about it—but toast and water, and three glasses of wine, sound like hard laws to me."

About the same time he writes to another friend, Miss Clephane:—

"The cause was a cramp in my stomach, which after various painful visits, as if it had been sent by Prospero, and had mistaken me for Caliban, at length chose to conclude by setting fire to its lodging, like the Frenchmen as they retreated through Russia, and placed me in as proper a state of inflammation as if I had had the whole Spafields' committee in my unfortunate stomach. Then bleeding and blistering was the word; and they bled and blistered till they left me neither skin nor blood. However, they beat off the foul fiend, and I am bound to praise the bridge which carried me over. I am still very totterish, and very giddy, kept to panada, or rather to porridge, for I spurned at all foreign slops, and adhered to our ancient oatmeal manufacture. But I have no apprehension of any return of the serious part of the malady, and I am now recovering my strength, though looking somewhat cadaverous upon the occasion."

His account of "the cramp setting fire to its lodging," is, we may take it, a graphic if poetical way of describing the onset of acute cholecystitis. The attacks increased in frequency

and severity and reached a climax in the Spring of 1819. How severe they were—and incidentally how much we of the present day owe to morphia and the hypodermic syringe, is shown by Mr Skene's description of an attack which he witnessed:—

"During his severest attack he had been alone at Abbotsford with his daughter Sophia, before her marriage to Mr Lockhart, and had sent to say that he was desirous I should come to him, which I did, and remained for ten days till the attack had subsided. During its course the extreme violence of the pain and spasmodic contraction of the muscles of the stomach were such that I scarcely expected the powers of endurance could sustain him through the trial, and so much at times was he exhausted by it as to leave us in alarm as to what the result had actually been. One night I shall not soon forget; he had been frequently and severely ill during the day, and having been summoned to his room in the middle of the night, where his daughter was already standing, the picture of deep despair, at his bed-side, the attack seemed intense, and we followed the directions left by the physician to assauge it. At length it seemed to subside, and he fell back exhausted on the pillow, his eyes were closed, and his countenance wan and livid. Apparently with corresponding misgivings, his daughter at one side of the bed and I at the other gazed for some time intently and in silence on his countenance, and then glanced with anxious inquiring looks to each other, till, at length having placed my finger on his pulse, to ascertain whether it had actually ceased to throb, I shall never forget the sudden beam which again brightened his daughter's countenance, and for a moment dispelled the intense expression of anxiety which had for some time overspread it, when Sir Walter, aware of my feeling his pulse, and the probable purpose, whispered, with a faint voice, but without opening his eyes, 'I am not *yet* gone.'"

Scott himself, and he was not accustomed to exaggerate pain, writes to Southey in April 1819:—

"I have been seized with one or two crises of my cruel malady lasting in the utmost anguish from eight to ten hours. If I had not the strength of a team of horses I could never have fought through it, and through the heavy fire of medical artillery, scarce less exhausting—for bleeding, blistering, calomel and ipecacuanha have gone on without intermission while, varying the agony of the spasms, laudanum became necessary in the most liberal doses, though inconsistent with the general treatment. . . . I am this day, for the first time, free from the relics of my disorder, and, except in point of weakness, perfectly well. But no broken-down hunter ever had so many sprung sinews, whelks

and bruises—and all through the unnatural twisting of the muscles under the influence of the cramp. I must be swathed in Goulard and Rosemary spirits."

Lockhart describes an attack which occurred when he was a visitor at Abbotsford in May 1819:—

"The reading of this long ballad, however (it consists of forty-three stanzas), seemed to have exhausted him: he retired to his bedroom; and an hour or two after, when we were about to follow his example, his family were distressed by the well-known symptoms of another sharp recurrence of his affliction. A large dose of opium and the hot bath were immediately put in requisition. His good neighbour, Dr Scott of Darnlee, was sent for, and soon attended; and in the course of three or four hours we learned that he was once more at ease. But I can never forget the groans which, during that space, his agony extorted from him. Well knowing the iron strength of his resolution, to find him confessing its extremity, by cries audible not only all over the house, but even to a considerable distance from it (for Ballantyne and I, after he was put into his bath, walked forth to be out of the way, and heard him distinctly at the bowling-green), it may be supposed that this was sufficiently alarming, even to my companion; how much more to me, who had never before listened to that voice, except in the gentle accents of kindness and merriment."

The very morning after this attack Scott said:—

"I feel hearty this morning and if my devil does come back again it won't be for three days at any rate. For the present, I want nothing to set me up except a good trot in the open air, to drive away the accursed vapours of the laudanum I was obliged to swallow last night."

When Lockhart said something about a ride of twenty miles being rather a bold experiment after such a night, he answered that he had ridden more than forty a week before in similar circumstances and felt nothing the worse. And yet we think it necessary to keep a patient in bed for a day or two after even a slight attack of biliary colic!

The effect upon Scott's general condition of these repeated attacks is graphically described by Lockhart:—

"I rode out to Abbotsford," he says, "with John Ballantyne towards the end of the spring vacation and, though he had warned me of a sad change in Scott's appearance, it was far beyond what I had been led to anticipate. He had lost a great deal of flesh—his clothes hung loose about him—his countenance was meagre, haggard, and of the deadliest yellow of the jaundice—and his hair, which a few weeks

before had been but slightly sprinkled with grey, was now almost literally snow-white."

This was in May 1819. As in his previous illnesses, the treatment he was subjected to was heroic. He was, of course, severely restricted in diet, and "his creature comforts"—as Old Mortality would have called them—were greatly abridged. He had, he says, to renounce beer and ale on all ordinary occasions, also "pastry, fruit, etc., and all that tends to acidity." For the relief of pain, hot baths were used or applications of hot salt, but nothing really influenced it except opium, of which he took enormous quantities:—

"Conceive," he says, "my having taken in the course of six or seven hours, six grains of opium, three of hyoscyamus, near 200 drops of laudanum, and all without any sensible relief of the agony under which I laboured."

Opium, however, never agreed with him and he describes, in an amusing way, which shows that his sense of humour remained unimpaired, the effect which it had on the bowels:—

"What the medical people think indispensable to relieve spasms brings on a habit of body which has to be counteracted by medicines of a different tendency, so as to produce a most disagreeable see-saw—a kind of pull devil, pull baker contention, the field of battle being my unfortunate præcordia. Or, to say truth, it reminds me of a certain Indian King I have read of in an old voyage, to whom the Captain of an European ship generously presented a lock and key with which the sable potentate was so much delighted that, to the great neglect, both of his household duties and his affairs of state, he spent a whole month in the repeated operation of locking and unlocking his back-door."

As usual, then as now, well-meaning friends were not backward in suggesting "cures":—

"I have had as many remedies," he writes, "sent me for cramp and jaundice as would set up a quack doctor—three from Mrs Plummer, each better than the other—one at least from every gardener in the neighbourhood—besides all sorts of recommendations to go to Cheltenham, to Harrowgate, to Jericho for aught I know. Now if there is one thing I detest more than another, it is a watering-place, unless a very pleasant party be previously formed, when, as Tony Lumpkin says, 'a gentleman may be in a concatenation.' The most extraordinary recipe was that of my Highland piper, John Bruce, who spent a whole Sunday in selecting twelve stones from twelve *south-running* streams with the purpose that I should sleep upon them, and

be whole. I caused him to be told that the recipe was infallible, but that it was absolutely necessary to success that the stones should be wrapt up in the petticoat of a widow who had never wished to marry again, upon which the piper renounced all hope of completing the charm. I had need of a softer couch than Bruce had destined me, for so general was the tension of the nerves all over the body, although the pain of the spasms in the stomach did not suffer the others to be felt, that my whole left leg was covered with swelling and inflammation, arising from the unnatural action of the muscles, and I had to be carried about like a child. My right leg escaped better, the muscles there having less irritability, owing to its lame state. Your grace may imagine the energy of pain in the nobler parts, when cramps in the extremities, sufficient to produce such effects, were unnoticed by me, during their existence. But enough of so disagreeable a subject."

He really seems in the end to have been cured by the use of calomel which he began in the summer of 1819, for, in July of that year, we find him writing to his friend, Mrs Clephane :—

"My health seems in a fair way of being perfectly restored. It is a joke to talk of any other remedy than that forceful but most unpleasant one—*calomel.* I cannot say I ever felt advantage from anything else; and I am perfectly satisfied that, used as an alterative, and taken in very small quantities for a long time, it must correct all the inaccuracies of the biliary organs. At least it has done so in my case more radically than I could have believed possible. I have intermitted the régime for some days, but begin a new course next week for precaution. Dr Dick, of the East India Company's service, has put me on this course of cure, and says he never knew it fail unless when the liver was irreparably injured. I believe I shall go to Carlsbad next year."

Five years later he is able to tell Southey :—

"You may have heard that about four years since I was brought to death's door by a violent, and at the same time most obstinate complaint, a sort of spasms in the stomach or diaphragm, which for a long time defied medicine. It gave way at length to a terrific course of calomel, such as made the cure almost as bad as the disease. Since that time, I have recovered even a better portion of health than I generally had before, and that was excellent. I do not indeed possess the activity of former days either on foot or horseback, but while I can ride a pony, and walk five or six miles with pleasure, I have no reason to complain."

Throughout the rest of his life we hear of no recurrence of the disease, although he sometimes complains of "bile" and "biliousness," so it would seem that the cure was permanent.

Naturally he had great faith in calomel ever afterwards, although he did not like its effects. "Base feelings this same calomel gives one—mean, poor, and abject,"—and when his daughter, Mrs Lockhart, had an attack of gall-stones after a confinement, we find him writing to Miss Edgeworth, saying that, "She is now able to take a grain or two of calomel which is specific in the complaint." Certainly such a complete recovery from gall-stones is rather remarkable and makes one wonder whether we make sufficient use of Dr Dick's remedy in that condition to-day.

It is a striking testimony to Scott's stoical courage that throughout the whole period of these attacks he continued to carry on his literary work. During these years he wrote part of *Rob Roy* and *Ivanhoe* and the whole of the *Bride of Lammermoor* and the *Legend of Montrose.* He would lie on a sofa, we are told, dictating even during an attack, and "though he often turned himself on his pillow with a groan of torment, he usually continued the sentence in the same breath." "I trust by this time you have read Rob," he writes to Morritt in January 1818, "I think he smells of the cramp," just as, later on, he was to say of another of his books, "it smells of the palsy." But in this judgment he was unfair to himself, for the above group of novels contains some of his best work.

When the *Bride of Lammermoor* was first put into Scott's hands in complete shape, James Ballantyne tells us that he did not recollect one single incident, character, or conversation it contained. Well may he add, "I believe you will agree with me that the history of the human mind contains nothing more wonderful." Mr John Buchan, however, is of the opinion that this novel is the only one which shows the shadow of his painful illness. "It was the product," he says, "of a drugged and abnormal condition, even as Coleridge composed *Kubla Khan* in an opiate dream. . . ."

When he was writing *Rob Roy*, James Ballantyne found him one day sitting with a blank sheet before him. "Ay, ay, Jemmy," he said, "but how the deuce can I make Rob Roy's wife speak with such a curmurring in my guts."

As regards Ivanhoe, Scott himself relates that when he went, many years later, to see it acted in Paris:—

"It was strange to hear anything like the words which I (then in an agony of pain with spasms in my stomach) dictated to William Laidlaw at Abbotsford, now recited in a foreign tongue, and for the

amusement of a strange people. I little thought to have survived the completing of this novel."

Never, surely, was there a greater triumph of the mind over the body.

Although he had no further attacks of gall-stones Scott's health was never fully re-established, and from this time on we hear many more complaints of illness. In 1822 when he was much overworked and worried by the preparations for King George the Fourth's visit to Edinburgh, he suffered from a curious skin disease which he describes in a letter to his son :—

"I suffered a good deal in consequence of excessive fatigue and constant anxiety (at the King's visit), but was much relieved by a very inconvenient and nasty eruption which physicians call the prickly heat. Ross says if it had not broke out I should have had a bad fever—in the meantime, though the complaint has gone off, my arms and legs are spotted like a leopard's."

What this eruption was we may leave it to dermatologists to decide, but, four years later, he said that it had been more or less troublesome ever since.

In December 1825 he had a bad attack of renal colic.

"I was seized," he records, "with a most violent pain in the right kidney and parts adjacent, which, joined to deadly sickness which it brought on, forced me instantly to go to bed and send for Clarkson. He came and inquired, pronouncing the complaint to be gravel aggravated by bile. I was in great agony till about two o'clock, but awoke with the pain gone."

It seems to have been a solitary attack, for there is no mention of it again.

About the same time, when he was fifty-four years of age, he hints at some urinary complaint. Here are two references to it in the *Journal*, under dates 22nd November and 7th December 1825 :—

"Wine I seldom taste when alone, and use instead a little spirits and water. I have of late diminished the quantity, for fear of a weakness inductive to a diabetes—a disease which broke up my father's health, though one of the most temperate men who ever lived."

"Indeed, if this troublesome complaint goes on, it bodes no long existence. My brother was affected with the same weakness, which, before he was fifty, brought on mortal symptoms. The poor Major had

been rather a free liver. But my father, the most abstemious of men, . . . had the same weakness of the powers of retention which now annoys me, and he, I think, was not above seventy when cut off. Square the odds, and goodnight Sir Walter about sixty."

Again, we can only guess at the nature of the trouble. Was it a true glycosuria, a condition from which he might very well have suffered, or was it prostatic or some form of polyuria? At all events it does not seem to have led to any serious consequences, though Scott's prognosis as to the duration of his life, though he did not die of "a diabetes," proved to be extraordinarily accurate.

From time to time, too, he suffered as he had done occasionally all through his life from nervous disturbances which he refers to sometimes as the "morbus eruditorum" and sometimes, more colloquially, as the "black dog." To quote the *Journal* again :—

"A touch of the morbus eruditorum, to which I am as little subject as most folks, and have it less now than when young. It is a tremor of the heart, the pulsation of which becomes painfully sensible—a disposition to causeless alarm—much lassitude—and decay of vigour of mind and activity of intellect . . . Fighting with this fiend is not always the best way to conquer him. I have always found exercise and the open air better than reasoning."

"I was sorely worried by the black dog this morning, that vile palpitation of the heart—that tremor cordis—that hysterical passion which forces unbidden sighs and tears and falls upon a contented life like a drop of ink on white paper . . . ."

It may be a comfort to other sufferers from similar nervous perturbations to know that even a man of so firm and manly a mind and on the whole of so cheerful a disposition as Sir Walter Scott was not exempt from them.

In addition to all this Scott suffered, particularly in the winter of 1826-27, from successive attacks of severe "rheumatism," probably fibrositis, which is said to have been "fixed on" him by sleeping in wet sheets at a French inn. This, in conjunction with his lameness, made the taking of exercise increasingly difficult and no doubt contributed to the final break-up of his health.

We now approach the fourth and last of Scott's pitched battles with Disease—a prolonged engagement in which he

was finally worsted. The first mention of it is in a letter to Terry in November 1822.

"I have not been very well—a whoreson thickness of blood and a depression of spirits arising from the loss of friends have annoyed me much; and Peveril will, I fear, smell of the apoplexy."

Lockhart adds:—

"This letter contains the first allusion to the species of malady that ultimately proved fatal to Sir Walter Scott. He, as far as I know, never mentioned to any one of the family the symptoms which he here speaks of; but long before any serious apoplectic seizure occurred, it had been suspected by myself and by others of his friends, that he had sustained slight attacks of that nature, and concealed them."

Looking back upon the course of his last illness towards the end of his life he writes in his *Journal*:—

"I think and think in vain, when attempting to trace the progress of this disease, and so gradually has my health declined, that I believe it has been acting upon me for ten years, gradually diminishing my strength.

We shall probably not be wrong in assuming that during these ten years he was the subject of high blood pressure and many of the symptoms which he mentions from time to time throughout this period—throbbing at the heart, nervousness, insomnia, precordial pain, headaches, mental confusion, and giddiness—are compatible with that diagnosis. It is probable that he had an hereditary tendency to arteriosclerosis, for his father, mother, and elder brother all died of "strokes," and, if overwork and anxiety cause high blood pressure, Heaven knows poor Scott in his later years had enough of both. Nevertheless he toiled on, working hard at the *Fair Maid of Perth* and the *Tales of a Grandfather*, but in June 1829 he had an attack, Lockhart says, "which gave his family great alarm, and which for some days he himself regarded with the darkest prognostications. After some weeks, during which he complained of headaches and nervous irritation, certain hæmorrhages indicated the sort of relief required, and he obtained it from copious cupping. After this he felt better, he said, than he had done for years before; but there can be little doubt that the natural evacuation was a serious symptom. It was, in fact, the precursor of apoplexy." The patient himself records in his *Diary* for 3rd June:—

"The ugly symptoms continue. Dr Ross does not make much of it and I think he is apt to look grave . . . In the evening he ordered

me to be cupped, an operation which I only knew from its being practised by that eminent medical practitioner the barber of Bagdad It is not painful; and, I think, resembles a giant twisting about your flesh between his finger and thumb."

For a few days after, he says, his head "aiked consumedly." He remained fairly well, however, and toiling away as usual until the following February, when he had his first real "stroke."

"On the 15th of February, 1830," Lockhart says, "about two o'clock in the afternoon, he returned from the Parliament House apparently in his usual state, and found an old acquaintance, Miss Young of Hawick, waiting to show him some MS. memoirs of her father (a dissenting minister of great worth and talents), which he had undertaken to revise and correct for the press. The old lady sat by him for half-an-hour while he seemed to be occupied with her papers; at length he rose, as if to dismiss her, but sunk down again—a slight convulsion agitating his features. After a few minutes he got up and staggered to the drawing-room, where Anne Scott and my sister Violet Lockhart were sitting. They rushed to meet him, but he fell at all his length on the floor ere they could reach him. He remained speechless for about ten minutes, by which time a surgeon had arrived and bled him. He was cupped again in the evening, and gradually recovered possession of speech and of all his faculties in so far that, the occurrence being kept quiet, when he appeared abroad again after a short interval, people in general do not seem to have observed any serious change."

There can be no doubt that this attack frightened him and he gave up smoking for a time in consequence of it. His doctors thought, or pretended to think, that it was from the stomach, but he knew better himself and wrote that it "looked woundy like palsy or apoplexy." Characteristically, however, he adds, "Well, be it what it will, I can stand it." His relations had no doubt of the nature of his disease and, as he was at this time giving up work in Edinburgh and preparing to "set up his rest" at Abbotsford, "they reflected that the only medical practitioner resident within three miles of him might, in case of another seizure, come too late, even although the messenger should find him at home; but that his practice extended over a wide range of thinly peopled country, and that at the hour of need he might as probably be half a day's journey off as at Melrose. We would fain have persuaded him that his library,

catalogues, and other papers had fallen into such confusion that he ought to have some clever young student in the house during the winter to arrange them; and had he taken the suggestion in good part, a medical student would of course have been selected. But, whether or not he suspected our real motive, he would listen to no such plan, and his friendly surgeon (Mr James Clarkson) then did the best he could for us by instructing a confidential domestic, privately, in the use of the lancet."

This shows the importance attached to immediate blood-letting in the treatment of "strokes" in Scott's day, and whether we regard them as due to small hæmorrhages, or, what is probably the more orthodox view now, to thrombosis, there can be little doubt that the lancet usually brought some immediate relief in his case. Perhaps we do not have recourse to it often enough at the present time.

After this he resumed more or less his ordinary life and gradually mixed again in society, although observing a strict regimen as regards food and wine. Towards the end of November of the same year (1830) he had another, but slighter, seizure. He describes it, as well as the attack in February, in this passage in the *Diary*:—

"Last spring Miss Young had occasion to call on me on some business. . . . As I endeavoured to explain to her what I had to say I had the horror to find I could not make myself understood. I stammered, stuttered, said one word in place of another—did all but speak; Miss Young went away frightened enough, poor thing . . . I was bled with cupping glasses, took medicine and lived on panada; but in two or three days I was well again. The physicians thought, or said at least, that the evil was from the stomach. It is very certain that I have seemed to speak with an impediment, and I was, or it might be fancied myself, troubled with a mispronouncing hesitation. This went on till last November, when Lord —— came out to make me a visit. . . . This night I took a very little drop, not so much as a bumper glass, of whisky altogether. It made no difference on my head that I could discover, but when I went to the dressing-room I sank stupefied on the floor. I lay a minute or two—was not found, luckily, gathered myself up, and got to my bed. I was alarmed at this second warning, consulted Abercrombie and Ross, and got a few restrictive orders as to diet."

He had now no longer any doubt as to the real nature of his malady, as the following extracts from his *Journal* show, and

they show, too, the cheerful courage with which he faced the situation :—

"I feel myself decidedly weaker in point of health and am now confirmed I have had a paralytic touch. I speak and read with embarrassment, and even my handwriting seems to stammer. This general failure

With mortal crisis doth portend
My days to appropinque an end.

I am not solicitous about this."

"My voice sunk and my head strangely confused. When I begin to form my ideas for conversation, expressions fail me, even in private conversation, yet in solitude they are sufficiently arranged. I incline to hold that these ugly symptoms are the work of imagination."

"I am sensible that my fingers begin to stammer—that is, to write one word instead of another very often. I impute this to fancy, the terrible agency of which is too visible in my illness, and it encourages me to hope the fatal warning is yet deferred."

"A friendly visit from Ebenezer Clarkson of Selkirk, a medical gentleman in whose experience and ingenuity I have much confidence, as well as his personal regard for myself. He is quite sensible of the hesitation of speech of which I complain, and thinks it arises from the stomach. Recommends the wild mustard as an aperient."

"The physical folks, Abercrombie and Ross, bled me with cupping glasses, purged me confoundedly, and restricted me of all creature comforts. But they did me good—and I got rid of a giddy feeling I have been plagued with."

"I do not think my head is weakened but a strange vacillation makes me suspect. Is it not thus that men fail, becoming, as it were, infirm of purpose . . . Yet why be a child about it? What must be, will be."

"I have a hideous paralytic custom of stuttering with my pen, and cannot write without strange blunders; yet I cannot find any failure in my intellect."

In April 1831 he had a third severe "stroke," which he refers to in his Diary for 17th to 24th April :—

"Unpleasantly occupied by ill-health and its consequences, a distinct shock of paralysis affecting both my nerves and spine though beginning only with a very bad cold. Dr Abercrombie was brought out, but young Clarkson had already done the needful—that is, had bled and blistered severely, and placed me on a very restricted diet.

Whether these precautions have been taken in time I cannot tell. I think they have, though severe in themselves, beat the disease . . . I only know that to live as I am just now is a gift little worth having. I think I will be in the Secret next week unless I recruit greatly.

"The medical men persist in recommending a seton. I am no friend to these risky remedies."

"The blow which he records was greatly more severe," Lockhart says, "than any that had gone before it. Sir Walter's friend, Lord Meadowbank, had come to Abbotsford, as usual when on the Jedburgh Circuit; and he would make an effort to receive the Judge in something of the old style of the place; he collected several of the neighbouring gentry to dinner, and tried to bear his wonted part in the conversation. Feeling his strength and spirits flagging, he was tempted to violate his physician's directions, and took two or three glasses of champagne, not having tasted wine for several months before. On retiring to his dressing-room he had this severe shock of apoplectic paralysis, and kept his bed under the surgeon's hands for several days."

The following two entries also refer to this attack :—

"The plough is coming to the end of the furrow, so it is likely I shall not reach the common goal of mortal life by a few years—I am now in my sixtieth year only."

"At his (his son's) entreaty I have agreed to put in a seton, which they seem all to recommend. My own opinion is, this addition to my tortures will do me no good; but I cannot hold out against my son. So, when the present blister is well over, let them try their seton as they call it."

Lockhart went down to Abbotsford at this time. "On my arrival," he says (in May 1831), "I found Sir Walter to have rallied considerably; yet his appearance, as I first saw him, was the most painful sight I had ever then seen. Knowing at what time I might be expected, he had been lifted on his pony, and advanced about half a mile on the Selkirk road to meet me. He moved at a foot-pace.

"Sir Walter had had his head shaved, and wore a black silk night-cap under his blue bonnet. All his garments hung loose about him; his countenance was thin and haggard, and there was an obvious distortion in the muscles of one cheek. His look, however, was placid—his eye as bright as ever—perhaps brighter than it ever was in health; he smiled with the same

affectionate gentleness, and though at first it was not easy to understand everything he said, he spoke cheerfully and manfully."

There was now distinct evidence of mental impairment. Miss Ferrier, the novelist, was staying with him, but "she could not," says Lockhart, "be an hour in his company without observing what filled his children with more sorrow than all the rest of the case. He would begin a story as gaily as ever, and go on, in spite of the hesitation in his speech, to tell it with highly picturesque effect—but before he reached the point, it would seem as if some internal spring had given way—he paused and gazed round him with the blank anxiety of look that a blind man has when he has dropped his staff. Unthinking friends sometimes pained him sadly by giving him the catch-word abruptly."

By July he had improved considerably. He was calmer and more collected, his speech became much clearer and such were "the symptoms of energy still about him" that Lockhart began to think a restoration not hopeless. He was able to take a little driving tour with his son-in-law, but during the journey Lockhart was distressed to notice that "he seemed constantly to be setting tasks to his memory. . . . He was obviously in fear that this prodigious engine had lost, or was losing, its tenacity, and taking every occasion to rub and stretch it." Dr Johnson, it may be remembered, when similarly afflicted, had recourse to the same sort of tests. Any improvement, however, was short-lived, for we find him writing in October :—

"I have been very ill—a total prostration of bodily strength is my chief complaint. I cannot walk half a mile. There is besides some mental confusion. . . ."

A year before he had written to Ballantyne: "My present idea is to go abroad for a few months if I hold together as long. So ended the Fathers of the Novel—Fielding and Smollett—and it would be no unprofessional finish for yours—W. S.!" This idea was now put in practice, and he set off for Italy in October. On his arrival at the Lockharts' in Regent's Park a consultation was held, which is thus described in the Biography :—

"Dr Robert Ferguson, one of the family with which Sir Walter had lived all his days in such brother-like affection, saw him constantly while he remained in the Regent's Park; and though neither the

invalid nor his children could fancy any other medical advice necessary, it was only due to Ferguson that some of his seniors should be called in occasionally with him. Sir Henry Halford (whom Scott reverenced as the friend of Baillie) and Dr Holland (an esteemed friend of his own) came accordingly; and all the three concurred in recognising certain evidence that there was incipient disease in the brain. There were still, however, such symptoms of remaining vigour, that they flattered themselves, if their patient would submit to a total intermission of all literary labour during some considerable space of time, the malady might yet be arrested. When they left him after the first inspection, they withdrew into an adjoining room, and on soon rejoining him, found that in the interim he had wheeled his chair into a dark corner, so that he might see their faces without their being able to read his. When he was informed of the comparatively favourable views they entertained, he expressed great thankfulness; promised to obey all their directions as to diet and repose most scrupulously; and he did not conceal from them that 'he had feared insanity and feared *them*.'"

After some delays he embarked on the frigate *Barham* and was able in his *Diary* to record quite vividly his experiences on the voyage. On reaching Malta he was equal to some sightseeing, but we are told that at a dinner at the Chief Justice's "he partook too freely of porter and champagne for one in his invalid state," and next day was "flushed and stuporous." Leeches were applied to the head and though they did not give immediate relief to his uncomfortable sensations he was evidently much better next morning. From Malta he went to Naples and then to Rome, but he would not cease from work and was now engaged in writing *The Siege of Malta*. In Rome he was able to go about a good deal with his friend Mr Cheney, to whom he several times complained that his disease "sometimes confused and bewildered his senses, while at others he was left with little remains of illness except a consciousness of his state of infirmity." A restless desire to get home grew upon him. "Let us to Abbotsford," he cried, as if he knew that he had not long to live. Accordingly the long journey north was resumed, but on 9th June, when descending the Rhine near Nimeguen, he had another serious attack of "apoplexy combined with paralysis." His servant's lancet, we are told, restored, after some minutes, the signs of animation, but this was the crowning blow. Nevertheless, he pushed on next day and finally reached London on 13th June, where he

lay for a few weeks in an hotel in Jermyn Street, being attended again by Dr Ferguson, with Sir Henry Halford and Dr Holland in consultation. During this time he was "calm but never collected and in general either in absolute stupor or in a waking dream. He never seemed to know where he was. . . ." Yet he managed to retain a certain impressive dignity through it all. As someone said of him, "the gentleman survived in him the genius." On 7th July he left London and was conveyed by steam-boat to Edinburgh, Dr Watson (afterwards the well-known Sir Thomas Watson) accompanying him on the journey. He arrived in a state of almost complete unconsciousness, but on the 9th, when he came in sight again of his beloved Abbotsford, he was roused to excitement and could with difficulty be held down in the carriage. At Abbotsford he lingered on for two months, and at last, at 1.30 P.M. on 21st September, he breathed his last. His passing was peaceful.

"It was a beautiful day," writes Lockhart, "so warm that every window was wide open, and so perfectly still that the sound of all others most delicious to his ear, the gentle ripple of Tweed over its pebbles, was distinctly audible as we knelt around the bed, and his eldest son kissed and closed his eyes."

So he had his wish and he did not live on, as he had dreaded, to be "an idiot and a show."

A post-mortem, unfortunately limited to the head, was carried out by the country doctor, of which the following are the notes:—

"Abbotsford, 23rd September 1832.—This forenoon, in presence of Dr Adolphus Ross, from Edinburgh, and my father, I proceeded to examine the head of Sir Walter Scott.

On removing the upper part of the cranium, the vessels on the surface of the brain appeared slightly turgid, and on cutting into the brain the cineritious substance was found of a darker hue than natural and a greater than usual quantity of serum in the ventricles. Excepting these appearances, the right hemisphere seemed in a healthy state, but in the left, in the choroid plexus, three distinct though small hydatids were found; and on reaching the corpus striatum it was discovered diseased—a considerable portion of it being in a state of ramollissement. The blood-vessels were in a healthy state. The brain was not large—and the cranium thinner than it is usually found to be. J. B. CLARKSON."

Medical History of Sir Walter Scott

It is pretty much what might have been expected, it being borne in mind that in those days the term "hydatid" was applied to any form of cyst. It would have been interesting, however, in view of his earlier illnesses, to have heard something of the state of the gall-bladder and of the large bowel.

Scott died at the beginning of his sixty-second year. He was older than either of the "Fathers of the Novel," Smollett and Fielding, and older, too, than any of his great Victorian successors, Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot, but he was not an old man as we reckon age now. Yet during the last ten years of his life he constantly speaks of himself as if he were aged. Were the men of his time really older for their years than we are, or did they merely feel older? It is an interesting question, but one is sometimes inclined to think that nowadays we mature later, although we live longer than they did a hundred years ago: the fruit ripens more slowly even if it hangs longer on the tree. Be this as it may, Scott, at least, had crowded into his "hour of glorious life" an amount of enjoyment and of achievement which would have filled the lives of any two ordinary men, and so we cannot feel that he was cut off prematurely.

When all is said, however, the chief impression left by a study of Sir Walter Scott's medical history is that of the courage and good humour with which he met his illnesses. The patient was always more interesting than his disease, just as the man was greater than his books; and, undaunted in the face of death, and never unmanned by pain, he stuck doggedly to his self-imposed tasks. In this he is surely an example to our valetudinary and fear-ridden generation.

ROBERT HUTCHISON.

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